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"WE TOOK OUR EYE OFF THE BALL"

A Commencement Address

by

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I

In February of 1975, the institutions of the American nations, and especially its plurality of governments, are the object of more grumbling than at any time in the two centuries of our durable democracy.

Congressmen Find Voters Back Home Disillusioned and Disgusted, the New York Times headlined last month on the transplanted birthday of George Washington and Abraham Lincoln. Americans are sore at inflation, at bureaucracy, at corruption -- at too much of it, anyway -- at being out of work, and at entanglement in other people's wars.

At the same time, the general opinion of the non-American majority of mankind is generating more international flak at our expense than at any other moment in the history of our international relations. In the recent international meetings about "a new international economic order", we have been accused (by people who have benefitted from our bounty and attended our universities) of wasting resources, profiteering on energy, building weapons we don't need, polluting the air and the oceans, feeding our babies too well, consuming too much ourselves, and contributing to the poverty and starvation of others. That there is color of truth in these charges does not make them easier to take: in political polemics, it's the half-truth that hurts the most.

We Americans have a strong penchant for personalizing our likes and dislikes. The Gallic shrug and the Russian cliché that means something like "It doesn't matter; what can anyone do about it?" have their counterparts in most cultures; in America we want to find a scapegoat and blow our poisoned darts at his person. But governments and leaders can take special

But beginning about a dozen years ago a succession of traumatic experiences, seeming denials of what Americans thought they meant to do and to be, have greatly weakened this sense of destiny. Three political assassinations, our first unwinnable war, an unprecedented White House scandal, the quite sudden sense of being unsafe on familiar city streets, the collapse of the dollar as the world's key currency, the visible damage of industrial growth to the environment, the new fusion of recession and inflation, sudden shortages of food and oil, and the frustrations of global politics in a disorderly world -- each by itself might have provoked an orgy of national self-doubt. Coming together, they produced something like a certainty: that the strength and reach of American power, far from spreading our traditional values overseas, did not even ensure their protection at home.

One way to get our eye back on the ball is to think hard about what government is for. One high official who resigned from a White House job, early in the first Nixon Administration, complained afterwards that he had never sat in a meeting in which the question under discussion was "Why?"

Why <u>is</u> the United States of America? What are we trying, through our government, to be and to do? Surely a central theme of our national experience is that incandescent phrase from the Declaration of Independence, that all men -- they didn't mean women, but we do -- are born equal, with unalienable and equitable rights.

III

The search for equity is a big part of the story of civilization. And in modern times, a desire to be treated fairly seems to be the engine of change, the spur to upward

This enumeration of the needs of modern man assumed an awareness by the individual of his interdependence with society. It implied that he cares about his destiny, and would not passively accept what fate or the gods or foreign rulers or his own family had provided in the way of environment. This is of course a comparatively new state of mind for most of mankind, dating in the West from the Renaissance and the Reformation, spreading to the East through colonial governors, navies, armies, missionaries, traders, and reformist politicians, all of them from different motives stirring up ancient societies by providing new wants to want and an exciting presumption of change.

The basic needs of citizens in any society can, of course, only be measured in the light of their own expectations, in their time and place. Words about desirable values work the way the United States Constitution works -- old words acquire new meanings as they are applied to new situations. When Americans were poor, "welfare" was quantified in dollars and calories and square feet of living space. "Justice" focussed on fairness in apportioning material things. "Achievement" could be measured by rungs on an income ladder. The urge for "participation" was to be fulfilled in decision-making about economic status and opportunity.

But in our latterday affluence, "welfare" extends beyond the quantity of groceries to the quality of life. "Justice" picks up meanings in race relations and political arithmetic. "Achievement" is reinterpreted to include life styles in which success cannot be measured in dollars or political power. "Participation" broadens out to include many kinds of community cooperation and international consultation that used to be reserved for businessmen and lawyers from early-arriving ethnic groups, and for professional diplomats.

Equity between "private" and "public" organizations was unbalanced for too long in favor of private organizations performing public tasks without public representation or public review. From time to time, some scandal or outrage would produce a Public Utility Holding Company Act or a Securities and Exchange Commission. But this kind of adhockery is no match for the sensitive and important issues involved, for example, in the current deadlock of environmental and energy-production interests. The balance has now been redressed somewhat by a vigorous private environmental movement, and the growth of public-interest law firms. Now there is a problem of ensuring the public responsibility of private citizens who presume to speak for the public as a whole; the growing costs of openness are threatening to swallow up its benefits.

Equity between levels of government has been compromised by the tendency to ask Washington to take over any task that was not being efficiently handled by the States or cities. But I have a strong hunch that a growing proportion of the public business is now going to have to leak out of the national level of government -- some of it into international institutions (of this, more in a moment), and a great deal of it into regional, state and municipal governments.

It was sad that the sound rethinking of practical federalism which produced the notion of revenue-sharing was distorted by the effort to use it as a disguise for budget-cutting in social programs -- and sad, too, that the Presidential leadership required to make this good idea also popular was drowned in its own corruptive reach for power. Let's get our eye back on that ball, too: the idea of collecting revenues at the Federal level and spending them in more decentralized ways is worth a better break in a different political climate.

in peace and isolation. But our new effort to make our Federalism work for people, and not against them, comes just when most of the major destiny decisions, affecting the life and health and future of every American, can only be arrived at by a complex process of planet-wide bargaining.

So a sixth kind of equity our Federal system has to seek involves all those other people who aren't Americans and don't want to be, but who also have basic needs and are increasingly insisting on being treated fairly according to their concepts of equity. The most important ball to keep in view is the biosphere.

Each of us has to face it now:

Present trends in population growth, urban in-migration, inflation, unemployment, food production and distribution, energy supply and demand, pollution of the air and of inland and oceanic waters, military technology, restrictive ideologies and inward-looking nationalisms, all taken together, are clearly adverse to the self-fulfillment of nearly all human beings, and to the survival of a very large minority of the human race. These problems are so interrelated that action on any of them requires thinking about all of them.

Even if commenced now or soon, the reversal or control of these trends will require enormous changes in attitudes and styles of living, and will also require a generation of time -- say, the rest of the 20th century.

Meanwhile, shortages and the desperation and rivalries they intensify will provide acute conflicts. The arms available for use in these conflicts which are not only conventional and exotic military weapons but also economic and monetary and psychological and biological and meteorological weapons, will no longer be available to an oligopoly of a few so-called "powers".

No one who sat in line at a filling station in the fall of 1973 can doubt the intimate interconnection between faraway causes and highly personal effects. What is in doubt is the willingness of Americans to adjust their personal habits for faraway reasons -- we have done so on a national scale only in wartime.

We can tell that our willingness is in doubt because so many American political leaders still calculate that we are not prepared to do what they say in speeches needs to be done. They don't think we are yet willing to conserve fuel, limit our appetites, revise our economic expectations, or care enough about starving foreigners to rescue them. (Other nations' leaders similarly doubt their people's capacity to cope: the government of India is still reluctant to concede that food supply and population growth are disastrously out of balance.)

Coping with interdependence begins with wide public understanding of the need for adjustments in practices and policies we Americans have long regarded as essentially private, personal decisions -- how much to buy, what to eat, how fast and far to drive, how many children to have, whether to pollute, what to produce and sell, how hard to work, what to aspire to.

Our capacity to rise to the occasion is partly a function of education -- what we learn about the realities of interdependence in school and college, from the media, and from each other. It is also party a function of leadership: Americans were vaguely aware in 1947 that things were dangerously awry in postwar Europe, but it took a stunning act of leadership, the Marshall Plan, to convert that general knowledge into a 1948 plan to do something decisive about European recovery.

But today, the prospects for mankind cannot be transformed merely by the efforts and enactments of political leaders. The complexity of our predicament is such that no person or small group can be effectively in charge, so all of us find ourselves

education of family planning, the assessment of environmental impacts, the systematic analysis of conflict. How much faster could we adjust if colleges and universities and other "leading institutions" were leading, rather than following, their students in responding to the imperative of interdependence?

So the capacity to cope with interdependence is there, in our impressively adaptable human nature. But it has to be energized -- in the United States and in other nations -- by a new kind of leadership. The best of the leaders that emerge among us in the next few years will be those who understand that narrow nationalism can be popular at the same time that it is inoperative.

Charlie Brown is right, for most cases, when he says that "No problem is so big and complicated that it can't be run away from." But the humanistic management of interdependence is the exception to his rule. It is not in the American character to shrug and declare even the biggest problem insoluble, or up to some one else to tackle. As Charlie Brown also said, "There's no heavier burden than a great potential." And the United States of America still has the world's greatest potential -- if we keep our eye on the ball.